

Lesson 3

When the book of Ezra opens, the people of God are living in exile under a foreign king. Last week we ended the class by considering the important question – where are we and how did we get here?

We started with the destruction of the Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, and we looked briefly at the Babylonian kings that followed him. Persia had just taken over when class ended.

History, Continued...

In 539 Cyrus ordered Gobryas, one of his officials, to attack Babylon, and the city was quickly taken.

Herodotus tells us that the Persians were able to enter Babylon by diverting the Euphrates River, which ran through the city, into an artificial lake, thus lowering the water level enough for the soldiers to enter the city and take the Babylonians by surprise.

Daniel 5 described how Belshazzar fell from power suddenly one night while he was banqueting.

Xenophon corroborated this. He said the Persians attacked the city during a festival when “all Babylon was accustomed to drink and revel all night long.”

Herodotus wrote: “The Babylonians themselves say that owing to the great size of the city the outskirts were captured without the people in the center knowing anything about it; there was a festival going on, and even while the city was falling they continued to dance and enjoy themselves, until hard facts brought them to their senses.”

Many of the Babylonians looked upon Cyrus as a liberator. They were not happy with the way Nabonidus had neglected their religion. The Jews were also optimistic about the potential political change because of how Cyrus was known to treat those he conquered.

The Assyrians had been very cruel. They had harshly suppressed the peoples they conquered; many times they had moved entire populations from one land to another and then replaced them with other conquered peoples. This is what they had done when they conquered the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 B.C.

The Babylonians, although somewhat less cruel, followed much the same policy. When Jerusalem was destroyed in 587 B.C., many of the Jews were taken captive to Babylon.

When the Persians took control, however, Cyrus encouraged the peoples he conquered to develop their own culture and continue their own religion. He and some of his successors even helped support the local priests in conquered nations. After conquering Babylon, he restored the place of Marduk as their principal god and allowed captive peoples to return to their homelands.

We know much about Cyrus from the famous Cyrus Cylinder – a clay barrel with a long inscription in cuneiform writing honoring Cyrus. It is mainly concerned with Cyrus’s conquest of Babylon and was written to influence public opinion in his favor and legitimize his rule over Babylon.

It is a long inscription that first tells of the misdeeds of Nabonidus and Belshazzar. Then Cyrus continues:

Marduk ... scanned and looked through all the countries, searching for a righteous ruler willing to lead him in the annual procession. Then he pronounced the name of Cyrus, king of Anshan, and declared him ... to become the ruler of all the world.

The cylinder also tells us how Cyrus treated the gods of the people he conquered:

I returned to these sacred cities on the other side of the Tigris, the sanctuaries of which have been ruins for a long time, the images which used to live therein and established for them permanent sanctuaries. I also gathered all their former inhabitants and returned to them their habitations. Furthermore, I resettled upon the command of Marduk, the great lord, all the gods of Sumer and Akkad whom Nabonidus has brought into Babylon to the anger of the lord of the gods, unharmed, in their former chapels, the places which make them happy.

As we will see, the resettlements in Jerusalem came from a similar pronouncement that we will read about in Ezra.

One key difference is that, rather than returning an image, Cyrus returned to the Jerusalem temple the precious vessels Nebuchadnezzar had taken.

The Persian Empire now included all of Babylon and Syria-Palestine. Although not mentioned in the Bible, Cyrus's son Cambyses II conquered Egypt in 525 B.C., making the Persian Empire greater than its predecessors.

In 522 Cambyses II received bad news from Persia: someone impersonating his brother Smerdis had taken over the Persian government. Cambyses had earlier ordered his brother murdered so this would not happen.

Cambyses hurried back to Persia. But according to Herodotus, on his way through Syria, "as he was springing into the saddle, the cap fell off the sheath of his sword, exposing the blade, which pierced his thigh." Cambyses died three weeks later.

Meanwhile at Susa the usurper was killed by a group of seven conspirators. Darius, one of the seven conspirators, was named king. This was Darius the Great. Under him the Persian Empire reached its greatest power and most efficient organization. (This is **not** the Darius of Daniel 6:28.)

Darius left many inscriptions telling about his exploits. The longest and most famous is the Behistun Inscription carved on a huge rock formation on the main road that led from Mesopotamia to Iran. The inscription was carved on a cliff, 225 feet above the plain. It also includes reliefs of Darius, his officials, and his subjects. Darius has his foot on the imposter he replaced.

It was during Darius' reign that the construction of the temple in Jerusalem was resumed and completed (Ezra 5-6). As we will see in Ezra 4-5, the Jews' work on the temple had been halted because of the opposition of their neighbors. Cambyses apparently had supported the opposition – and isn't it interesting that he died unexpectedly while "springing into the saddle"!

In Ezra 6, the Jews informed Darius that Cyrus himself had authorized the building of the temple. Darius searched the archives, found that it was true, so he again authorized the construction and commanded the opposition to cease.

At the same time, in 520 B.C., God raised up the prophets Haggai and Zechariah, who told the people that they should renew the work on the temple. The people responded, God removed the opposition, and the temple was dedicated in 515 B.C. (Ezra 6:16-18).

The political organization of the Persian Empire was different from that of Assyria and Babylon. It reached its greatest development during the reign of Darius I.

The whole empire was divided into 20 satrapies. Each one was governed by a Persian commissioner or satrap, usually from the Persian noble families. These satraps were virtual kings over their satrapies. They levied taxes and provided troops for the king. The satrapies were further divided into provinces, which were supervised by a governor, usually a descendant of the local nobility. Zerubbabel and Nehemiah served as governors.

Palestine belonged to the satrapy called “Beyond the River,” which means the region west of the Euphrates. According to Herodotus this was the fifth satrapy. It included Syria, Phoenicia, and Palestine to the border of Egypt as well as Cyprus.

During Darius’ reign, the Greek settlements in Asia Minor rebelled against the Persian Empire. They were brought under control, but Darius then attempted to take the Greek mainland. He was defeated at the famous Battle of Marathon in 490 B.C.

Xerxes I (Ahasuerus), son of Darius, had served as viceroy over Babylon for 12 years under his father’s rule. His great ambition as king of Persia was to conquer Greece. After quelling revolts in Egypt and Babylon, he began his Greek campaign in the spring of 480 B.C.

After initial successes, conquering the northern part of the Greek mainland and burning the acropolis in Athens, Xerxes’ forces suffered a naval defeat at Salamis, which led to his withdrawal from Greece. The events of the Book of Esther took place during his reign.

Some suggest that the plot by palace officials to assassinate Xerxes, which Mordecai uncovered, may have been a result of Xerxes’ humiliating defeat in Greece.

Although Mordecai had saved Xerxes from one palace plot, his reign of 20 years was ended by another such plot. The captain of his bodyguard plotted to take over the throne and assassinated him in August of 465. Xerxes’ oldest son was then murdered by his younger brother, Artaxerxes I, who became the next king of Persia.

The final century of the Persian Empire before its fall to Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. was characterized by revolts and economic decline. Increasing taxation and the greed of government officials were factors in the growing impoverishment of the people.

According to R. N. Frye, “The traditional explanation of the fall of the empire as the result of abuses of their positions by those in power, the decadence and corruption at court and among the aristocracy, combined with a fall in the standards of living of the common folk, can be further

documented by Babylonian tablets.”

The Jews in the Period of Exile

The Babylonian siege of Jerusalem in 597 B.C. and the first deportation, which included the exile of King Jehoiachin, are generally considered the beginning of the Babylonian captivity.

Although those captured in battle probably were taken to Babylon as slaves, and many of the exiles were poor, the situation of most Jews in Babylon appears to have been good. Only King Jehoiachin and his family, captured in 597 B.C., were confined; and they were released in 562 B.C. The rest of the Jews were free to settle in communities and to engage in normal agriculture or trade.

It should come as no surprise, then, considering conditions in Judah and Babylon, that when the Persians allowed the Jews to return under Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel and again in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, many preferred to remain in Babylon.

During the captivity the Jews lived among a foreign population and were naturally influenced by that environment. The most important influence was the Aramaic language. During the captivity, Aramaic became their principal spoken language. Babylonian influence is also seen in names such as Sheshbazzar and Zerubbabel.

The prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel greatly influenced the Jewish captives in Babylon. Before the fall of Jerusalem, few in Israel heeded these prophecies; but when the predictions about Jerusalem’s destruction came true, the Jews realized that Jeremiah and Ezekiel were truly prophets sent by God. Although Jeremiah’s ministry appeared to be a complete failure during his lifetime, his messages became one of the principal reasons for the survival of the Jewish faith.

After carrying away captive the best of the population in Judah, the Babylonians did not bring other peoples into Judah as the Assyrians had done in the north after the fall of Samaria. Thus a population vacuum was created in Judah. Archaeological excavations indicate that Judah was sparsely populated in this period. Except for the Negev and along the northern frontier, virtually all the fortified towns in Judah had been destroyed.

Since the time of Joseph, Jews had frequently looked upon Egypt as a place of refuge, although they were repeatedly admonished by the prophets not to attempt to find security there. It is likely that some migrated there following the fall of the Northern Kingdom in 722 B.C. The Bible tells of a group who left Judah for Egypt after the fall of Jerusalem, taking Jeremiah with them (2 Kings 25:25-26; Jer. 41:16-18).

This is supported by the Elephantine papyri, our primary evidence of Jews in Egypt in the Persian period. This collection of fifth century B.C. papyri was from a Jewish military colony on the island of Elephantine in the Nile. The site was a frontier outpost on Egypt’s southern border occupied by Jewish mercenaries and their families. It was apparently founded sometime in the sixth century, perhaps soon after the destruction of Jerusalem. The papyri, consisting of legal documents and letters, date from the fifth century B.C. and reveal much about the political situation and about Jewish laws and customs there.

In both Ezra and Nehemiah, we read of neighboring enemies of the Jews. Judah was surrounded

by other provinces, all part of the fifth satrapy we mentioned earlier. Samaria was the province on the north where Sanballat was governor. Ammon-Gilead was the province on the east where Tobiah was governor. Arabia-Idumea was on the south where Geshem was governor. On the west was the province of Ashdod.

The Role of Time in the Book of Ezra

With its very first words, the book of Ezra rivets the text to the line of time: “Now in the first year of Cyrus king of Persia...” At each successive turn of events, Ezra gives us temporal markers.

In all, more than 40 time markers are given in the book, and the book ends with yet another temporal pinpoint, “And they made an end with all the men that had taken strange wives by the first day of the first month” (10:17). Beginning, middle, and end—every part of the book of Ezra shows a careful attention to time.

At the same time, however, the inclusion of all these dates in Ezra creates something of a problem. Since dates are characteristic of a book of history, and because we expect a book of history to unfold itself in chronological order, we would expect that the book of Ezra should unfold itself in just the sequence that things happened. But it does not.

After covering more than 80 years (with some gaps) of post-exile history in 1:1-4:23 (538–457 BC), without skipping a beat Ezra jumps back 63 years to 520 BC (4:24) and picks up the account of the temple’s completion where he left it in 4:5.

With the rebuilding of the temple complete in 516 BC (4:24–6:22), an almost offhanded “after these things” transports the reader forward over more than 57 years of largely undisclosed history and lands him in 458 BC, the seventh year of Artaxerxes (7:1, 7).

In contrast to the first six chapter’s 80-year span (538–457 BC), the last section (7:1–10:44) covers precisely one year to the day (1/1/458 BC to 1/1/457 BC).

The book also adopts a variable *pace* in the telling of this history—sometimes moving moderately, sometimes at a gallop, other times inching genealogically name by name.

Here is a question for us: Is this odd treatment of time part of the message of Ezra? If so, what is it telling us?

Chronological Anomalies

Of the four significant departures from chronology that occur in Ezra, two of them involve Chapter 4. The other two involve Ezra 6:14 and the order in which the events of the second return are described in Ezra 7.

Anomaly One: Artaxerxes Then Darius

The first temporal anomaly occurs between 4:23 and 4:24, where the text switches from the time of Artaxerxes back to the time of his grandfather, Darius I.

The first two chapters of Ezra recount Cyrus’s decree to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem and the people’s return to the land of Israel. Chapter 3 begins with all the sons of the exile gathering

in Jerusalem on the first day of the seventh month of Cyrus's reign to restore the altar and reestablish sacrificial worship.

Roughly two years later, Jeshua and Zerubbabel stir up the people to lay the foundation of the temple and commence its reconstruction (3:8). After refusing their adversaries' request to help rebuild the temple, the Jews faced 15 years of organized opposition and resistance until the reign of Darius (4:1–3).

During the reign of Ahasuerus (486–465) their enemies lodged another complaint against them (4:6). The rest of chapter 4 (4:7–23) records two instances of opposition during the reign of Artaxerxes (465–424), the second of which resulted in an imperial decree authorizing the cessation of all Jewish building activity on the city walls.

To this point the narrative has followed a strictly chronological line despite numerous gaps. All the temporal signposts in Ezra point forward until the final verse of chapter 4, where the reappearance of Darius's name indicates that time has been warped, and what was long past is present again. The 35-year gap between 4:5 and 4:6 is abruptly reopened, and the text spends over 700 words filling in the gapped information concerning the temple's completion during the reign of Darius.

Why tell about opposition to the building of Jerusalem's walls, opposition that happened years after the rebuilding of the temple, before one tells how the temple was rebuilt?

The chronological facts of the matter are that the opposition instigated by the Samaritans succeeded in hindering the reconstruction of the temple until Darius's second year (4:24). At that time Haggai and Zechariah delivered God's message and stirred the people to work (5:1).

Tatnai, the governor, investigated the building activity, sent a report to Darius for confirmation of the Jews' claims, and requested instructions about how to proceed (5:3–17). Darius supported the work, and the rebuilding of the temple was completed (6:1–15).

It was some time later, during the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes, that the opposition resumed (4:6–7). Why does Ezra tell us about this opposition out of its chronological order?

To appreciate the significance of the text's order, we need to recognize the effects it has on the reader.

As the reader moves into chapter 5, it appears that the Samaritans had won (4:23), and the Jews were in for another beating, this time from Tatnai. But Darius's support for the Jewish efforts radically alters the dynamic of the situation.

Darius's decree transformed the reconstruction from a beleaguered effort to an imperially supported project with more than adequate resources and authority. The placement of this incident after all the previously recounted opposition creates a far greater sense of **reversal** than its historical placement ever could.

Darius's decree effectively reverses the frustration that mounted into despair as chapter 4 ends. Hostility is turned into help. The "bad guys" lose; the "good guys" win. God comes through for

His people.

The episode's closing comment summarizes Ezra's point: "For the LORD had made them joyful, and turned the heart of the king of Assyria unto them, to strengthen their hands in the work of the house of God, the God of Israel" (6:22).

(Why is the king of Persia called the king of Assyria in that verse? Stay tuned...)

This reversal is the thematic fulcrum for the first half of the book. Ezra's audience is living in the aftermath of the Samaritans' heavy-handed enforcement of Artaxerxes' decree to stop all work on the city walls (4:23). They had been prospering under Artaxerxes' favor. Apparently, they were actively rebuilding Jerusalem when their enemies successfully exploited the king's financial concerns to gain an injunction against them.

If 4:23 forms the background to Hanani's report to Nehemiah (Neh. 1:3), Nehemiah's reaction gives a picture of the sorrow and gloom that must have engulfed God's people.

A significant part of Ezra's purpose for writing is to revive the people's hope for the future by looking back at how God had caused His people to triumph over persistent opposition. The text is ordered in a way that creates hope for the future.

How do others deal with this chronology issue?

Radical critics use it to denounce the entire book. Torrey describes the book as a chaotic jumble of temporal fragments, misaligned and incomprehensible. Batten argues that multiple editings of the book have left it "very badly arranged." Other critics complain about the chaotic order of the book.

But these critics have numerous problems. First, and most important, they reject the inspiration of the text, and they treat it as simply a product of man. Second, they treat the book solely as a history text (which one might expect to be chronological) and not also as a theological text (which might rearrange things to make a theological point, as I believe Ezra does). Third, they are arrogant. If Ezra didn't order the text as they would have done, then Ezra must be at fault.

Others try to maintain a forced chronology by renaming and rearranging the various kings. Josephus is the best example of this. According to Josephus's account, the "Artaxerxes" of Ezra 4:8–23 was Cambyses, the son of Cyrus. This identification smoothes out some of chapter 4's chronological challenges, but it does not account for the "Ahasuerus" in 4:6.

Also, although we often refer to Josephus, we need to keep in mind that Josephus was not inspired, and in fact we know he made some serious errors. For example, Josephus places the return of both Ezra and Nehemiah in the reign of Xerxes and states that Nehemiah arrived in Jerusalem in the 25th year of Xerxes. The problem is that Xerxes' reign lasted only 21 years.

The best view is the one we discussed earlier. Ezra departs from a strict chronological order on occasion to make an important theological point.